


# Rivers Bridge State Park

## Visitors Guide



*BATTLE OF SALKEHATCHIE RIVER, S.C., Feb. 3d, 1865.  
43d and 63d Ohio Charging the Battery and Brigade.  
1st Division 17th A.C. Engaged.*



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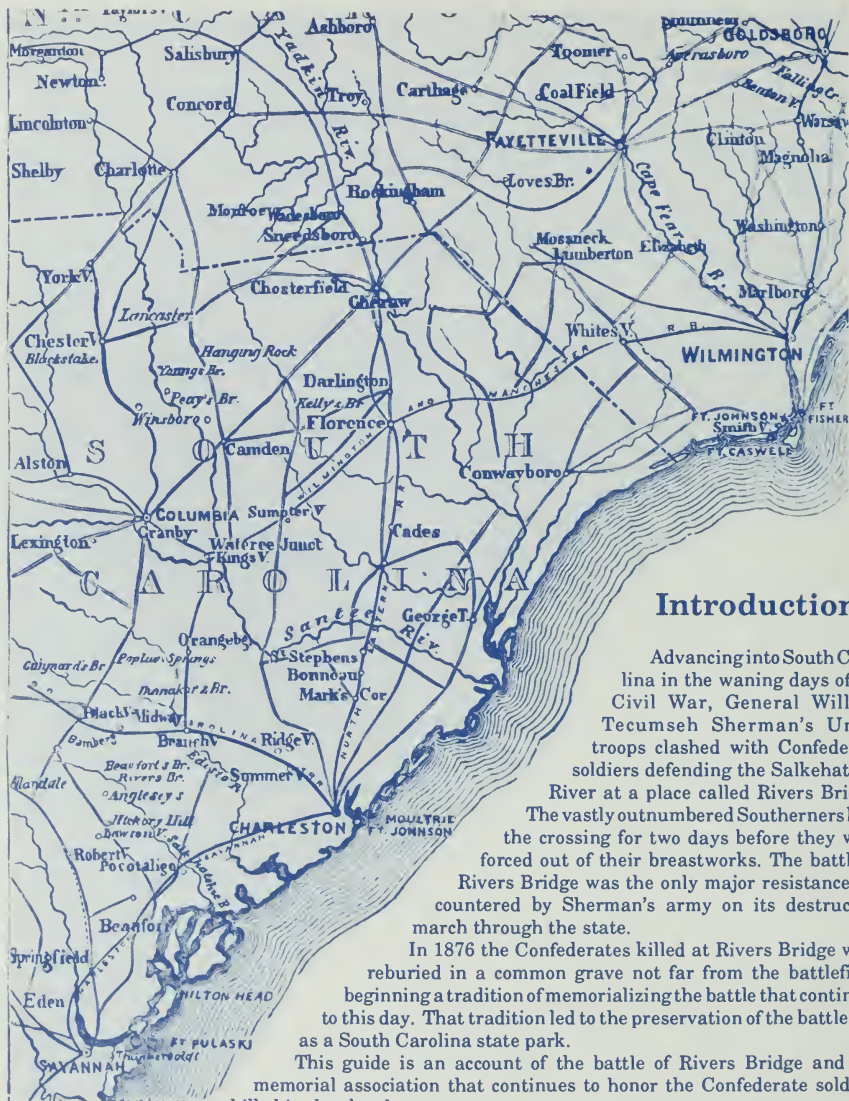
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Division of State Parks

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## Introduction

Advancing into South Carolina in the waning days of the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman's Union troops clashed with Confederate soldiers defending the Salkehatchie River at a place called Rivers Bridge. The vastly outnumbered Southerners held the crossing for two days before they were forced out of their breastworks. The battle of Rivers Bridge was the only major resistance encountered by Sherman's army on its destructive march through the state.

In 1876 the Confederates killed at Rivers Bridge were reburied in a common grave not far from the battlefield, beginning a tradition of memorializing the battle that continues to this day. That tradition led to the preservation of the battle site as a South Carolina state park.

This guide is an account of the battle of Rivers Bridge and the memorial association that continues to honor the Confederate soldiers killed in that battle.

Map of Sherman's Carolina March.

# "This Indescribably Ugly Salkehatchie": The Battle of Rivers Bridge

2-3 February 1865

J. Tracy Power

## The Opening of the Carolinas Campaign, December 1864 - February 1865

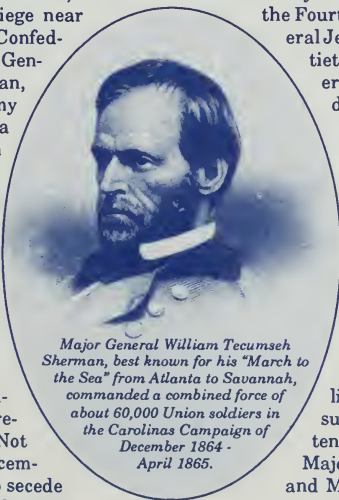
At the end of 1864, after almost four years of fighting, the Civil War was nearing its end. Though the armies of the Confederacy had generally fought well, winning many impressive battles over the Union armies, they had lost nearly as many battles as they had won. Even more significant than lost battles, the loss of large numbers of men killed, wounded, and captured and large amounts of territory now occupied by Federal forces further weakened the Confederacy's chances to win its independence from the United States. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, general-in-chief of the Union armies, faced General Robert E. Lee in a siege near Petersburg, Virginia, near the Confederate capital of Richmond. Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, commanding a large Federal army in Georgia, had captured Atlanta and then marched to Savannah in the fall of 1864. The famous "March to the Sea" destroyed much of the countryside and also destroyed many citizens' will to continue the war.

After Sherman's combined forces reached Savannah in December 1864 their immediate objective was South Carolina -- the state that in many officers' and soldiers' eyes, including the commander's, was responsible for the Civil War. Not only had South Carolina, in December 1860, been the first state to secede from the Union, but the first shots of the war were fired at Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, in April 1861. Sherman remembered later that "somehow our men had got the idea that South Carolina was the cause of all our troubles . . . I would not restrain the army lest its vigor and energy should be impaired; and I had every reason to expect bold and strong resistance at the many broad and deep rivers that

lay across our path." He intended to move his force in two large wings, one by way of Beaufort and Pocoligo, the other by way of Hardeeville and Robertsville, and to reach the state capital at Columbia by the first of February 1865.

Sherman's movements and troop dispositions were intended to encourage the badly scattered Confederates to believe that Charleston, not Columbia, was his real objective. His right wing, the Army of the Tennessee, was commanded by Major General O. O. Howard and was composed of the Fifteenth Army Corps under Major General John A. Logan and the Seventeenth Army Corps under Major General Frank P. Blair, Jr. The left wing, the Army of Georgia (formerly the Army of the Cumberland), was commanded by Major General Henry W. Slocum and was composed of the Fourteenth Corps under Major General Jefferson C. Davis and the Twentieth Corps under Brigadier General Alpheus S. Williams. Brigadier General H. Judson Kilpatrick commanded Sherman's cavalry. The total strength of Sherman's force was approximately 60,000 men.

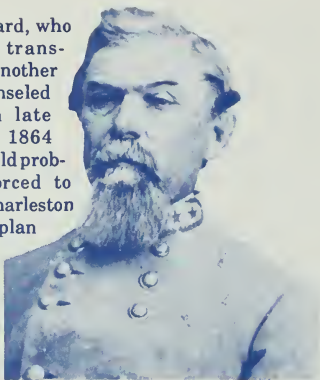
The Southerners opposing Sherman were drawn from various forces which had seen service from Virginia to Mississippi. Lieutenant General William J. Hardee commanded the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, and such prominent officers as Lieutenant General Daniel Harvey Hill, Major General Lafayette McLaws, and Major General Joseph Wheeler commanded troops under Hardee. General P.G.T. Beauregard, the senior officer in this part of the dying Confederacy, grossly exaggerated the prospects when he estimated that some 33,500 soldiers could be concentrated to face the Union advance into South Carolina. There were probably only about 20,000 Confederates available for service in the state by the end of January 1865.



Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, best known for his "March to the Sea" from Atlanta to Savannah, commanded a combined force of about 60,000 Union soldiers in the Carolinas Campaign of December 1864 - April 1865.



Beauregard, who was soon transferred to another army, counseled Hardee in late December 1864 that he would probably be forced to evacuate Charleston and should plan to "organize all your troops for the field, collecting sufficient transporta-



*Lieutenant General William J. Hardee had overall command of only about 20,000 Confederate soldiers defending South Carolina at the beginning of 1865.*

tion, ammunition, and provisions for an active campaign." He also outlined Hardee's defensive lines east of the Savannah River, with the Salkehatchie River as the main line of Confederate resistance. The Salkehatchie River flows from near present-day Williston to St. Helena Sound, near Beaufort. Elements of a small division of Southern infantry, detachments of cavalry, and several pieces of artillery, some 1,200 to 1,500 troops under the general command of Lafayette McLaws, soon established a strong defensive position on the north side of the river. Hardee thought Sherman's objective, if the Federals defeated McLaws and crossed the Salkehatchie, was either Charleston or the important railroad junction at Branchville.

McLaws was less than optimistic about South Carolina's ability, or its willingness, to resist Sherman's advance. "There is a great alarm all through the country and a strong disposition to give up, among the old residents even, and the females especially," he wrote in January. One of McLaws' noncommissioned officers was more hopeful. "We still hold the road to Hardeeville, but are going to evacuate the country to Salkehatchie as soon as we get the RR iron up—the line of battle will then be in 5 miles of GrandPas [Pocotaligo], but I hardly think the enemy will advance that way," Quartermaster Sergeant Abraham D. Williams of the 47th Georgia Infantry wrote on January 2nd.

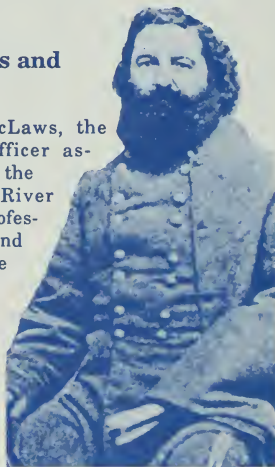
As it turned out, though the Federals did "advance that way," unusually severe thunderstorms prevented Sherman's entire force from

crossing over the flooded Savannah River until the last two weeks of January. One Union cavalry officer wrote in 1897 that "it was quite a common sight to see our infantry passing through these overflowed lands carrying their guns and ammunition high to keep them out of the water, but apparently and at all times, in good spirits . . . I think I am safe in saying that in nearly six weeks from the rains falling from above and the overflowed lands, a large portion of our army was not out of the wet long enough to get dry."

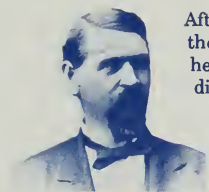
There were three major bridges over the Salkehatchie River in the immediate vicinity—from north to south, at about six-mile intervals, they were Buford's Bridge, Rivers Bridge, and Broxton's Bridge—and they were the focal point of both armies. At each main bridge was a series of smaller bridges over the innumerable streams, creeks, and swamps fed by the river. A Confederate reconnaissance in late January described the area: "The swamp is soft but not boggy; could with some difficulty be penetrated by horsemen in many places; in many places footmen can cross by felling timber, which is very thick.... The water covering the swamp is generally shallow—say from sixteen to eighteen inches deep. During dry seasons the river might be easily crossed at almost any point."

## Confederate Commanders and their Units

Lafayette McLaws, the Confederate officer assigned to defend the Salkehatchie River line, was a professional soldier and had once been one of the leading division commanders of General Robert E. Lee's famed Army of Northern Virginia. A Georgian, McLaws was an 1842 graduate of West Point and a veteran of the Mexican War.



*Major General Lafayette McLaws commanded the Confederate division which held the Salkehatchie River defenses. He wrote in January 1865 that "there is a great alarm through the country, and a strong disposition to give up."*



*Colonel George P. Harrison, Jr., of the 32nd Georgia Infantry, commanded a small brigade of Georgians and South Carolinians which defended Buford's Bridge, Rivers Bridge, and Broxton's Bridge. A biographical sketch of Harrison described him as having "great ability and stubborn valor."*

After service as colonel of the 10th Georgia Infantry, he was promoted to brigadier general in late 1861 and major general in early 1862. From 1862 to 1864 he commanded a division of Georgians, South Carolinians, and Mississippians under Lee. Fighting in such campaigns as the Seven Days, Antietam, Fredericksburg--where he was instrumental in the decisive victory--Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg, McLaws compiled a solid, if not outstanding, combat record. Controversy over his part in Lieutenant General James Longstreet's failed Knoxville campaign of 1863, however, led to his relief from command. Although a court-martial later cleared him of all charges, McLaws was transferred out of the Eastern theater and spent the rest of the war in Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Douglas Southall Freeman, eminent historian of the Army of Northern Virginia, summed up McLaws' career well when he observed, "he was not accounted among the ablest of division commanders, but he was respected as a man and a soldier."

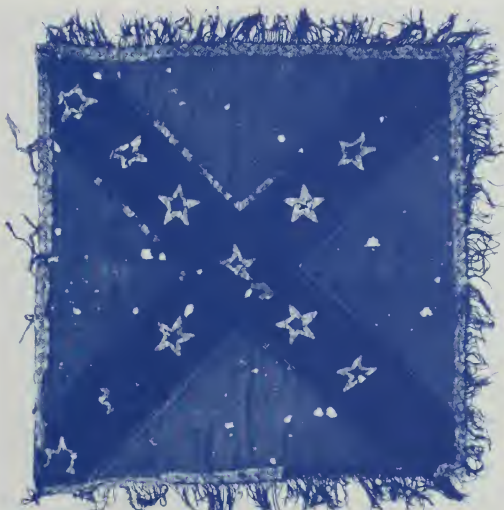
McLaws' troops defending the Salkehatchie bridges were a small brigade commanded by Colonel George P. Harrison, Jr. of the 32nd Georgia Infantry. Harrison, though not quite twenty-four, was al-

ready an accomplished officer and veteran of several varied campaigns and assignments. A graduate of the Georgia Military Institute, Harrison served with the 1st Georgia Regulars in Virginia before becoming colonel of the 32nd Georgia in 1862. He fought in South Carolina during most of the war, taking part in the battles around Charleston in 1863 and 1864. These actions included Battery Wagner and Johns Island, and Harrison briefly commanded Fort Johnson on James Island. He was wounded twice, on Johns Island and later while commanding a brigade at Olustee, Florida, in February 1864. One of his superiors at Charleston called Harrison and the 32nd Georgia "this gallant officer and his capital command." In the fall of 1864 he was ordered to Florence to take charge of the Federal prison camp, but only commanded the prison a short time before rejoining his brigade. Though he commanded a brigade of Georgia regiments for over a year and was often recommended for promotion by high-ranking generals, Harrison

was never officially given the rank of brigadier general.

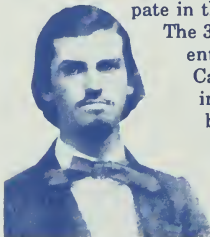
Harrison's brigade, headquartered at Broxton's Bridge, consisted of the 5th, 32nd, and 47th Georgia Infantry regiments; detachments of the 1st and 3rd South Carolina Cavalry regiments; two guns of the Palmetto Battalion, South Carolina Light Artillery; and detachments of Georgia reserves. The core of Harrison's brigade,

in addition to his own 32nd Georgia, were the 5th and 47th Georgia, both also veteran units. The 5th had seen action in such significant Western campaigns as Stone's River, Vicksburg,



*The battleflag of the 47th Georgia Infantry, one of the Confederate units which fought at Rivers Bridge. The 47th Georgia and the 32nd Georgia Infantry made up the core of the small detachment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin H. Bacon, Jr.*

Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Atlanta before being assigned to the defense of Savannah in late 1864. The 47th had fought at Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Atlanta in between tours of service at Charleston along with the 32nd. The 1st and 3rd South Carolina Cavalry were also veteran units. The 1st had served with the Army of Northern Virginia in such campaigns as Brandy Station, Gettysburg, Bristoe Station, and Mine Run before being ordered south in 1864 to participate in the Savannah campaign.



Lieutenant Colonel Edwin Henry Bacon, Jr. of the 32nd Georgia Infantry commanded the Confederate detachment of 700-800 men who defended the crossing at Rivers Bridge.

The 3rd had spent nearly the entire war on the South Carolina coast, never serving as a complete regiment but operating in detachments of one or more companies. The Palmetto Battalion, South Carolina Light Artillery, was another veteran unit; it had served for most of the war in the Charleston defenses. These Georgians and South Carolinians had fought most recently at Honey Hill, near Grahamville, on November 30th. They were part of a small Confederate force which blocked a Union attempt to push into South Carolina after the fall of Savannah. The Georgia reserves, organized to defend that state, had guarded Federal prisoners of war there and had not seen any fighting other than skirmishing around Savannah.

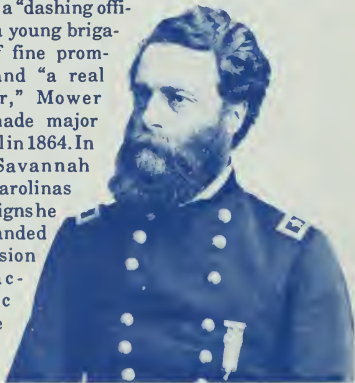
Most of Harrison's brigade defended the crossing at Rivers Bridge. This detachment or demi-brigade consisted of the 32nd Georgia, 47th Georgia, Company A of the Palmetto Battalion, South Carolina Light Artillery, and Companies B, H, and I of the 3rd South Carolina Cavalry. Adjutant Benjamin S. Williams of the 47th Georgia described the brigade at the beginning of 1865 as occupying "a line of front of about five miles. Our entire force did not number, at the time, more than 700 or 800 men." The small detachment was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin H. Bacon, Jr., of the 32nd Georgia, who had often commanded his regiment while Harrison was commanding the brigade or on detached duty. Bacon was described by Williams as "a splendid officer." When Robert Heriot, a South Carolina artilleryman, met Bacon near Savannah in December 1864 he was also impressed. Even under

Federal artillery fire, "this Colonel Bacon was a courtly kind of officer," Heriot remembered in 1922. "He treated a private with as much courtesy as an officer. I took quite a liking toward him. He was a man of fine appearance. We were joking each other about dodging the shells, and the Colonel admitted that he could not help dodging himself sometimes."

## Union Commanders and their Units

One Federal veteran of the Eastern theater described Sherman's men about this time as "a seasoned, hardy set of men.... Altogether they impressed us with their individual hardiness, powers of endurance, and earnestness of purpose, and as an army, powerful, full of resources and with staying qualities unsurpassed."

The First Division of the Seventeenth Corps was commanded by Major General Joseph A. Mower, a native of Vermont, a veteran of the Mexican War, and an officer in the antebellum army. He began his Civil War career as first lieutenant in the 1st United States Infantry. After a few month's service as colonel of the 11th Missouri Infantry, Mower was promoted to brigadier general in 1862. He commanded a brigade in such campaigns as Iuka, Corinth—where he was wounded and captured—Vicksburg, Meridian, and the Red River. After winning such praise from Sherman as one "of the finest generals in any army," a "dashing officer," "a young brigadier of fine promise," and "a real fighter," Mower was made major general in 1864. In the Savannah and Carolinas campaigns he commanded a division characteristic of the Army



Sherman called Brigadier General Joseph A. Mower, who commanded the First Division, XVII Corps, in the Federal Army of the Tennessee, "a real fighter." Mower's men nicknamed him "the Swamp Lizard" in recognition of their march through the swamps of lowcountry South Carolina.



of the Tennessee--with Midwestern regiments from Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin, and only a single Northeastern regiment, from New Jersey.

The First Brigade of the First Division was commanded by Brigadier General John W. Fuller, a native of Great Britain who grew up in Utica, New York. Fuller was a publisher and militia officer there, and later in Ohio, before the war. He served as colonel of the 27th Ohio Infantry and later commanded a brigade in the Island No. 10, Iuka, Corinth, and Central Mississippi campaigns. In December 1862 Fuller's brigade surprised and captured prisoners from Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest's Confederate cavalry near Parker's Cross Roads, Tennessee. He was promoted to brigadier in early 1864 and led his brigade during the Atlanta campaign. During the battle of Atlanta, where he commanded a division, Fuller "had a critical position, and handled his command with great skill and judgment," according to a superior. Fuller's brigade became part of the First Division of the Seventeenth Corps in the Savannah campaign. It was composed of the 64th Illinois, 18th Missouri, 27th Ohio, and 39th Ohio Infantry regiments, all Mid-

western veteran units which had served under Fuller since 1862.

The Second Brigade of the First Division was commanded by Colonel Milton Montgomery of the 25th Wisconsin Infantry, an Ohio native. He took command of his regiment when it was organized in 1862 and led it through the Vicksburg, Meridian, and Atlanta campaigns, commanding a brigade in the Meridian campaign. At Resaca, early in the Atlanta campaign, a superior commended "in the highest terms . . . the conduct and gallantry of Colonel Montgomery and his regiment." Montgomery was severely wounded and captured at the battle of Atlanta, but returned to open the Carolinas campaign and to take temporary command of the Second Brigade. In addition to Montgomery's own 25th Wisconsin, his force was composed of the 35th New Jersey and the 43rd and 63rd Ohio Infantry regiments. The 35th New Jersey had taken part in the Meridian, Atlanta, and Savannah campaigns; the 43rd and 63rd Ohio had seen service in the Island No. 10, Iuka, Corinth, Atlanta, and Savannah campaigns.

The Third Brigade of the First Division was commanded by Colonel John Tillson of the 10th Illinois Infantry. Tillson, who began the war as a



*These members of the 18th Missouri Infantry, in the First Brigade, First Division, were typical of the Federal soldiers who marched through South Carolina in the Carolinas Campaign. One observer described Sherman's army as "a seasoned, hardy set of men."*

captain in the regiment, took command of the 10th Illinois in 1862 and led it through the Island No. 10, Corinth, Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Savannah campaigns. Much of his service in 1863 was in Tennessee and Alabama against Confederate cavalry under Wheeler and Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan. Tillson succeeded to brigade command after the Atlanta campaign, and in addition to his own 10th Illinois, his small force was composed of the 25th Indiana and 32nd Wisconsin Infantry regiments. The 25th Indiana had served in the Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Meridian, Atlanta, and Savannah campaigns; the 32nd Wisconsin had seen action in the Central Mississippi, Meridian, Atlanta, and Savannah campaigns.



*Colonel Milton Montgomery commanded the Second Brigade of the First Division which consisted of Montgomery's own 25th Wisconsin, the 35th New Jersey, and the 43rd and 63rd Ohio Infantry regiments.*

Broxton's Bridges, with the First and Fourth Divisions of Major General Frank P. Blair Jr.'s Seventeenth Corps, which contained five brigades and some 12,000 to 15,000 Union soldiers. Blair ordered his First Division, three brigades numbering about 7000 to 9000 troops, to force a crossing at Broxton's Bridge and to proceed upriver to Rivers Bridge.

By February 2, Union forces of Major General Joseph A. Mower's First Division had begun to probe the Confederate positions along the Salkehatchie in an attempt to find a weak point and force a crossing. His skirmishers found Broxton's Bridge, six miles south of Rivers Bridge, intact, and positioned themselves to prevent the Confederates from burning the main crossing. With their unit pinned down in the earthworks, two men of the 10th North Carolina Battalion, also known as the 2nd Battalion North Carolina Heavy Artillery, but now serving as infantry, volunteered to burn the bridge in spite of the Union musketry. When McLaws' Confederate artillery opened up on the Federals the two North Carolinians "walked as straight to that bridge and burned it," a veteran remembered years later, "as they would to a dinner table." With this bridge destroyed the crossing at Rivers Bridge was to become the focus of Federal efforts

## Fighting at Rivers Bridge

Though there were the usual daily skirmishes and reconnaissances in force, the only action of any note between Savannah and Columbia occurred on February 2nd and 3rd at Rivers Bridge, one of several small bridges over the Salkehatchie River. O. O. Howard, commander of Sherman's right wing and a veteran of many campaigns in both the Eastern and Western theaters of the war, called the Confederate position there "as good for defense as any I ever saw." In the area around Rivers Bridge, some seven miles from Ehrhardt in present-day Bamberg County, the Salkehatchie was less a river than a swamp. One soldier of the 32nd Ohio later remembered it as "ranging from knee-deep to waist-deep, full of fallen trees, cypress vines, and deep holes, which, with the tangled underbrush and vines that grew between, made anything but pleasant marching."

Sherman planned to force a crossing over the Salkehatchie at or near Buford's, Rivers, and



*Major General O. O. Howard commanded Sherman's right wing, the Army of the Tennessee, which was composed of the Fifteenth and the Seventeenth Army Corps.*

to penetrate the swamp.

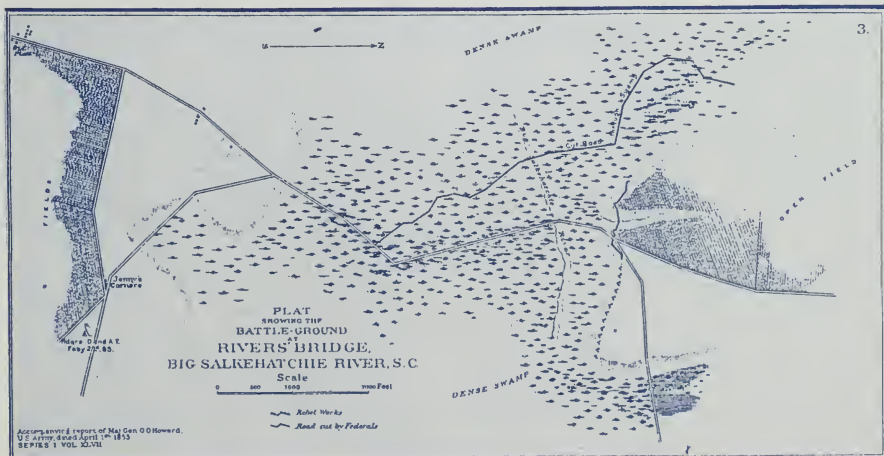
The First Division brushed aside the Southern skirmishers, primarily mounted elements of Wheeler's cavalry, bypassed Harrison's entrenched infantry, and proceeded immediately upriver to Rivers Bridge. When Mower arrived about noon on February 2nd, he found Bacon's small force waiting. The Confederates were deployed on a ridge which they had built up on the north side of the Salkehatchie, allowing them to concentrate their fire on the plank causeway which led to the bridge itself. The two guns of the Palmetto Battalion defended the approach to Rivers Bridge, while the 32nd and 47th Georgia, with the three companies of the 3rd South Carolina Cavalry -- dismounted and fighting as infantry - supported the artillery from earthworks on either side of the road.

A few hours of skirmishing between the two sides resolved nothing. Mower knew that a successful crossing here might enable Sherman to gain the rear of Hardee's ragged troops and reach Columbia virtually unmolested. About three o'clock he vigorously pushed his veterans forward. Wading through icy water that was often waist deep, cursing profusely and waving his sword, he issued orders for the assault. The 25th Wisconsin was to charge down the causeway, across Rivers Bridge, and into the Confederate breastworks on the north bank, followed by the rest of Montgomery's Second Brigade. Heavy fire from the outnumbered Southerners' artillery and mus-

kets, however, soon halted the Federal advance.

"As soon as the firing began," Army of the Tennessee commander O.O. Howard wrote in his autobiography, "our men sprang off the road and into the swamps. Ten or a dozen were hit, but it was at this time that the colonel of the Forty-third Ohio, Wager Swayne, was struck just below the knee with the fragment of a shell." Under such conditions Mower soon decided to withdraw his main force and leave a skirmish line as close to the bridge as possible. "Although the troops have had a terrible time fighting in the swamp," Colonel Oscar L. Jackson of the 63rd Ohio wrote in his diary soon after this repulse, "we will not get over tonight. As we will try to hold the distance we have gained, some regiments will have to remain in the water all night."

Mower conferred with his brigade commanders, sending up Fuller's First Brigade, followed closely by Tillson's Third Brigade, in support of Montgomery. As it grew dark in the swamp, he stationed the 18th Missouri on either side of the causeway to relieve the 64th Illinois and 39th Ohio, and waited for morning. "The main part of the troops were withdrawn to the high ground," the Army of the Tennessee's chief of artillery wrote that night. "The skirmishers strengthened and moved up." When Mower reached Sherman's headquarters a few miles away he learned that Sherman expected his division to force a crossing of the Salkehatchie River the next day as best it could. Wanting to avoid another costly frontal





assault, he then proposed an attempt to turn Bacon's flank. Tillson's brigade would skirmish along the causeway to create a diversion while Montgomery and Fuller would advance through the swamp west of the causeway.

The Georgians and South Carolinians across the river, meanwhile, were not idle. Unwilling to let Mower's Midwesterners have any rest before morning--if standing all night in the swamp or even lying in the marsh could be considered rest by any stretch of the imagination--Bacon's pickets kept up an annoying fire throughout the night from their earthworks. A heavy rain added to the opposing forces' misery.

At dawn of February 3rd, Mower's men had already been up for several hours. They were building two corduroyed roads, made of planks resting on logs laid across the muddy causeway, and were cutting one road for each attacking brigade. All day long Mower repeated his extraordinary efforts of the preceding day, alternately cursing and encouraging his Federals to cut trees, build the roads, and force their way across the Salkehatchie. Joseph T. Glaathaar, in his recent study of Sherman's men in the Savannah and Carolinas campaigns, notes that Mower "earned the nickname 'Swamp Lizard' from his men for the way he drove them through the nearly impassable swamps of South Carolina."

Bacon's Confederates still defended the causeway, the bridge, and the river, however. During the day they were reinforced by a regiment of Georgia reserves and two regiments of Wheeler's cavalry. The 5th Georgia Reserves were raw garrison troops, described as "16-year-old boys," which well illustrated the hopeless plight of the Confederacy in early 1865. As for Wheeler's cavalry, though they were veterans their reputation was an uneven one. The 3rd Arkansas and 4th Tennessee Cavalry regiments served in such actions as the Chickamauga, Knoxville, Atlanta, and Savannah campaigns. Wheeler's corps, however, had recently gained a reputation for loose discipline and a willingness to plunder civilians.

One Texas cavalryman observed, "I got with my command in the Carolinas and they were still battling with the enemy and slowly giving to their pressure, but from what I could see we made no great resistance." The Arkansans and Tennes-

seans were dismounted and placed in the earthworks to serve as an infantry support for the Georgians and South Carolinians already there. "Thus our force was increased to about 1,200 men," wrote one Georgia officer, "and until afternoon we repulsed the repeated onslaught of the enemy."

It was difficult for Mower's troops to work while waist deep in cold water and under steady infantry and artillery fire, and it was also difficult to respond with any effectiveness to the Confederates' defense of the bridge. During the afternoon, McLaws conferred with Bacon and asked him how long he could hold the Federals back. "In my presence," recalled Adjutant Ben Williams of the 47th Georgia, "the splendid officer, Colonel Bacon, replied, 'I can hold my position here, General, until

next Christmas if you can keep them off my flanks.'" McLaws told Bacon that his badly outnumbered forces would have to evacuate the entire Salkehatchie River line that night and said, "Keep them at bay until night and save your artillery and I will be perfectly satisfied."

By two in the afternoon, however, the diversion by Tillson's Third Brigade was partially successful, and small groups of that brigade crossed the Salkehatchie both above and below Rivers Bridge by felling cypress trees and crossing over on them. Captain Ephraim Wilson of the 10th Illinois described the scene at a crossing below the bridge:

*"My company was the first to cross. As soon as the tree was cut, I sprang upon it and crossed and ordered the men to follow. . . . I had only fairly got my Company deployed and nicely to work, when bang! I got it in the neck, and fell to my knees in water to my waist. I tottered back to the log over which we had just crossed and struck out for the shore. The balls were flying thick and fast, and if I had been so unfortunate as to be hit again by the*



Colonel Wager Swayne of the 43rd Ohio Infantry, in the Second Brigade, First Division, lost his right leg in the fighting at Rivers Bridge on February 2nd.



enemy, or had fallen off that log in that deep river it would have been all day with me, as I was so crippled in my arms I could not swim."

"This engagement was not a heavy battle," Wilson wrote a few days later, "but more what

we would call a good Third Brigade Skirmish."

As soon as Mower learned of this initial success, he ordered the rest of the brigade across the river and directed Fuller and Montgomery to stop work on the corduroy roads. Their two brigades were quickly ordered forward to support Tillson and to exploit the great opportunity presented by the successful crossing. Men from the 27th Ohio were detailed to fell cypress trees to clear the way, while the Pioneers attached to the First Division were ordered to complete the roads. Fuller, instead of following Tillson, swung around on his left, and then, taking advantage of his superior rank, ordered Tillson to halt while his own brigade came forward. This hesitation might or might not have made a difference. Mower later claimed it had prevented him from completely annihilating Bacon's command. In any case, Tillson and Fuller linked and put heavy pressure on the Confederate force, which was in real danger of being overwhelmed.

Bacon was barely able to get his men out of the breastworks before being overrun by a force nearly ten times the size of McLaws' entire division. "The time had come to save the troops and artillery," recalled Ben Williams:

*"Col. Bacon ordered that, as quickly as possible, four rounds should be fired for each piece in as rapid succession as possible and that the infantry near the battery should do the same. Under the dense smoke thus created the horses were run rapidly down to the battery, attached to*



*Major General Joseph Wheeler's undisciplined Arkansas and Texas cavalrymen supported Bacon's small force at Rivers Bridge.*

*the guns and succeeded in pulling them off with comparatively little loss. The troops to the left and right faced right and left onto the public highway and followed the artillery."*

Two regiments of Wheeler's cavalry which had been skirmishing at Buford's Bridge rode up in time to cover Bacon's withdrawal. They were the 8th and 11th Texas Cavalry regiments, which had seen action in such campaigns as Shiloh, Stone's River, Chickamauga, Knoxville, Atlanta, and Savannah; the 8th was famous as "Terry's Texas Rangers." It was almost dark by this point. Elias Perry of the 18th Missouri observed, "as we got out of the swamp we came to a halt to get the lines dressed for a charge. The front lines then moved on and our line followed close. It being merely night, the flash of the Rebel guns was a nice seen. The Rebs gave way without a general engagement." Another of Mower's veterans described the action more humorously. "While the rebels were trying to keep us from jumping into the main river and drowning ourselves the rest of the division bridged higher up, crossed, and jumped into the rebels so furiously that they cleared out in a great hurry," wrote Lieutenant George M. Wise of the 43rd Ohio.

Meanwhile, Major General Giles A. Smith's Fourth Division of the Seventeenth Corps had crossed the swamp after cutting corduroy roads and skirmishing most of the day, about halfway between Rivers Bridge and Broxton's Bridge.

The entire Confederate command on the Salkehatchie River was outflanked as well as outnumbered and forced to retreat some thirty miles northwest to Branchville. McLaws later reported to Hardee that "it was with difficulty that my command could be withdrawn, as I was completely flanked on both sides. The fighting at River's Bridge was quite sharp,

and lasted several hours." Mower's division, both in honor of its achievement and to guard against



*Captain Ephraim A. Wilson of the 10th Illinois Infantry, Third Brigade, First Division. Wilson, wounded as his company crossed the Salkehatchie River below Rivers Bridge on February 3, wrote that "the balls were flying thick and fast."*

the remote possibility of Bacon's Confederates returning with reinforcements, slept in the vacated breastworks at Rivers Bridge the night of February 3rd.

## The Aftermath and Significance of Rivers Bridge

Total Union casualties for the two days at Rivers Bridge numbered one hundred and one (sixteen killed and eighty-five wounded), most of whom were in the 10th Illinois, 25th Indiana, and 32nd Wisconsin of Tillson's Third Brigade. Mower's First Division lost several officers, including a captain of the 32nd Wisconsin killed and the colonel of the 43rd Ohio seriously wounded. Confederate casualties counted ninety-seven, roughly the same as the Federals, but with a high percentage of prisoners (eight killed, forty-four wounded, and forty-five captured), most of whom were in the 32nd and 47th Georgia. Bacon's small brigade lost heavily in officers, including a lieutenant of the Palmetto Battalion and a lieutenant of the 3rd Arkansas Cavalry killed, and the colonel of the 3rd Arkansas Cavalry and a captain of the 47th Georgia seriously wounded.

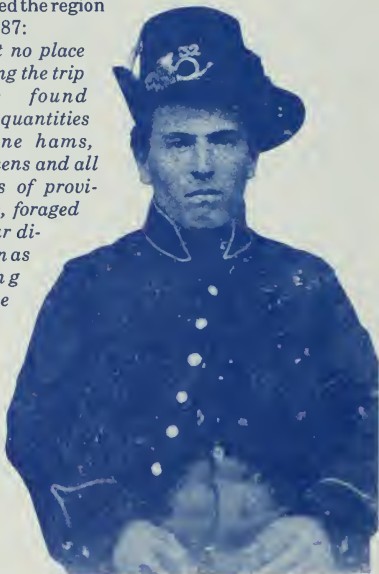
Rivers Bridge was a large-scale skirmish as much as a small-scale battle. Both the intensity of the fight and its outcome underscore the desperate condition of Confederate forces and excellent condition of Federal forces in South Carolina in February 1865. One of the most telling statistics is that some 800 to 1000 Confederates were attempting to block the path of some 7,000 to 9,000 Federals. Most assessments of the action are remarkably similar, with writers differing primarily over the scale and effectiveness of the Southerners' defense and the difficulties encountered by the Union advance. One historian has commented on the aftermath of Rivers Bridge: "The Confederate strong points tumbled down like toy blocks. After the loss of this primary defense line, the Confederates had to play Sherman's game and contend with fluid warfare in the Carolinas."

Most Southern accounts emphasize the inevitable nature of the action. The Charleston Mercury observed, quite perceptively, that "too much reliance, it seems, was placed upon the effectiveness of the river and the swamps which skirt it, as a bar to the enemy's progress. . . . Previous, however, to our retreat, the fighting at Rivers Bridge was quite sharp, and lasted several hours."

Ben Williams remembered in 1915 that the Confederates "knew, as we fell back, that our homes and the enemy were in our rear; of our dark abysmal front we knew not. God alone knew of Bentonville, Appomattox, and the near end."

Federal accounts, as might be expected, emphasize the natural obstacles of the river and the swamp more than the resistance offered by the Confederates. Howard called the river "this indescribably ugly Salkehatchie." Mower's official report claimed that "no troops could behave better than did those of my whole division, they being in the water for nearly two days, a great portion of the time waist deep. They endured this without murmuring, seeming to feel confident that their labors would be crowned by success." Sherman, in his memoirs, compared the opening of the Carolinas campaign to the more famous "March to the Sea," complaining that "were I to express my measure of the relative importance of the march to the sea, and of that from Savannah northward, I would place the former at one, and the latter at ten, or the maximum." An officer of the 15th Iowa described the region in 1887:

*"At no place during the trip were found such quantities of fine hams, chickens and all kinds of provisions, foraged by our divisions as along the h e*



Alfred Fessenden (above) and Richard Crowe (right) were members of the 32nd Wisconsin Infantry, Third Brigade, First Division. Their unusually tall hats were favored by many Federal soldiers from the Midwest.

*Salkehatchie. People living there avowed openly that if the Yankee army could cross such a swamp, there is no use in destroying their bridges; the next they expected to hear was that the Yanks would jump from treetop to treetop to effect their march across waters deemed perfectly safe by Hardee and Beauregard."*

If McLaws' veterans, in a heavily fortified and naturally strong position in the middle of a cold and terrible swamp, could not stop elements of Sherman's advancing army, then Sherman truly was invincible in South Carolina.



### *Broxton's Bridge*

*Jany [February] 3rd 1865*

*My Dear Wife --*

*If you are still in Aiken? leave at once. Sherman is advancing rapidly up along the river. If we cannot hold this line (and it looks like it) the road from Augusta to Branchville will be given up. The enemy are demonstrating on Broxtons and Rivers Bridges now, but I think they are making up for Augusta as they are moving up now along the Savannah. Wheeler's cavalry are worse than Yankees almost, and tis well to get out of their way. Tell Mr. Mahon to move you all at once, and if he wont do it now, go to Chester alone. You have the next two or 3 days to decide the matter. I am in my stocking feet or rather was yesterday, but one of our men loaned me his shoes. Is it not hard that I have to be dependent on the Government for shoes. I was in it all day yesterday, our regiment, about 200 strong were alone in the front of an army corps for 3 days. Hot work we had yesterday, lost 4 men, none from Co. I. And now with prayers for yours and my little ones safety, as also thanks that I am spared so far, farewell! God bless you all.*

*Sydney*

This letter was written by Sydney Ashe Legare to his wife after the battle at Rivers Bridge. Legare was a twenty-nine year old private in Company I, also known as the "Rebel Troop," of the 3rd South Carolina Cavalry.

# Order of Battle at Rivers Bridge

## 2-3 February 1865

### Confederate States Army

DEPARTMENT OF SOUTH CAROLINA,  
GEORGIA, AND FLORIDA  
Lieutenant General William J. Hardee

MCLAWS' DIVISION  
Major General Lafayette McLaws

HARRISON'S BRIGADE (Detachment)  
Lieutenant Colonel Edwin H. Bacon, Jr.

32nd Georgia Infantry  
Major Washington T. Holland

47th Georgia Infantry  
Captain Joseph C. Thompson  
(Wounded February 3rd)  
Captain Elliott W. Hazzard

REINFORCEMENTS FROM OTHER BRI-  
GADES, DIVISIONS, OR CORPS

Company B, 3rd South Carolina Cavalry  
Captain Archibald L. Campbell

Company H, 3rd South Carolina Cavalry  
Captain George C. Heyward

Company I, 3rd South Carolina Cavalry  
Captain John L. Seabrook

Company A, Palmetto Battalion,  
South Carolina Artillery  
Captain William E. Earle

5th Georgia Reserves (February 3rd)  
Major Charles E. McGregor

3rd Arkansas Cavalry (February 3rd)  
Lieutenant Colonel Marzaime Henderson  
(Wounded)  
Major William H. Blackwell (Wounded)

4th (or 8th) Tennessee Cavalry (February 3rd)  
Lieutenant Colonel Paul F. Anderson

8th Texas Cavalry, "Terry's Texas Rangers"  
(February 3rd)  
Lieutenant Colonel Gustave Cook

11th Texas Cavalry (February 3rd)  
Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Hooks

### United States Army

Major General William T. Sherman

RIGHT WING (ARMY OF THE TENNESSEE)  
Major General O.O. Howard

SEVENTEENTH ARMY CORPS  
Major General Frank P. Blair, Jr.

FIRST DIVISION  
Major General Joseph A. Mower

FIRST BRIGADE  
Brigadier General John W. Fuller

64th Illinois Infantry  
Major Joseph S. Reynolds

18th Missouri Infantry  
Colonel Charles S. Sheldon

27th Ohio Infantry  
Major Isaac N. Gilruth

39th Ohio Infantry  
Major Daniel Weber

SECOND BRIGADE  
Colonel Milton Montgomery

35th New Jersey Infantry  
Colonel John J. Cladek

43rd Ohio Infantry  
Colonel Wager Swayne  
(Wounded February 2nd)  
Major Horace Park

63rd Ohio Infantry  
Colonel Oscar L. Jackson

25th Wisconsin Infantry  
Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah M. Rusk

THIRD BRIGADE  
Colonel John Tillson

10th Illinois Infantry  
Captain David Gillespie

25th Indiana Infantry  
Lieutenant Colonel James S. Wright

32nd Wisconsin Infantry  
Lieutenant Colonel Joseph H. Carleton



# Epilogue Our Confederate Dead

Daniel J. Bell



*Soldiers rest, your  
warfare o'er,  
Sleep the sleep that  
knows not breaking,  
Dream of battlefields  
no more,  
Days of danger,  
nights of waking.*

Inscription on Rivers  
Bridge monument

In the spring of 1876, eleven years after the Battle of Rivers Bridge, a group of men from the communities around the Salkehatchie gathered the remains of the Confederates killed in the fight. They reburied the soldiers in a mass grave about a mile from the battlefield at the site of a church burned by Sherman's army. And to ensure that the dead would not be forgotten, the men formed the Rivers Bridge Monumental and Memorial Association to annually commemorate the battle and its Confederate casualties.

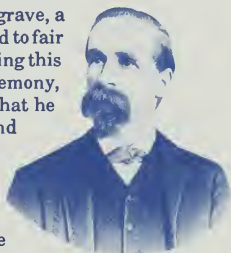
Throughout the South, people were remembering the Lost Cause. It became a common practice to decorate soldiers' graves with flowers, usually on or near April 26, the anniversary of General Joseph E. Johnston's surrender, or May 10, the date of Stonewall Jackson's death. Monuments erected to the memory of the dead southerners often resembled tombstones, fitting symbols of grief for a generation coming to terms with the losses of the recent war. Such a monument was placed above the grave at Rivers Bridge in 1878. Around the grave and monument a local tradition of paying tribute to the Confederacy developed.

Each spring the Rivers Bridge Monumental

and Memorial Association invited the public to attend its annual service and requested that all parties, ladies in particular, bring flowers to adorn the grave. An invocation opened the memorial. Solemn musical selections followed. Local dignitaries then delivered orations in praise of the southern cause and the men who died fighting for it. In their speeches they urged the living to adopt the virtues of courage and dedication that had been displayed by the dead. The commemoration concluded with the decoration of the grave, a responsibility reserved to fair young women. Watching this portion of the 1884 ceremony, an observer decided that he would gladly fight and die for the women of South Carolina.

The memorial services at Rivers Bridge recalled the losses suffered by the war-time generation, but they were not entirely somber affairs. They were also day-long social events that attracted large numbers of people to share in the abundant hospitality and good food offered every year. Young people came a-courtin', and politicians shook hands and solicited votes. With the passing of time, the memorials even helped to reconcile old enemies. E. H. Ellett, a company commander in the 10th Illinois Infantry, attended a memorial as the guest of Ben Williams, a captain in the 47th Georgia and member of the Memorial Association. The Confederate veterans at the memorial service welcomed the former Union soldier as a comrade, and Ellett was so moved by the ceremony that he wept when it ended.

By the turn of the century, crowds of 1,000 to 3,000 were typical at the Rivers Bridge memorials. Unfortunately, not all the people were drawn by southern patriotism. Some came to make money by selling refreshments. Others came merely to drink and disrupted the proceedings with pistol shots. The Memorial Association



Ben Williams survived the battle of Rivers Bridge, wrote extensively of his experiences in the war, and served for many years in the Memorial Association.



Dr. Robert C. Brabham, a local Confederate veteran, is credited with suggesting the reburial of those who died at the battle of Rivers Bridge. Brabham became the first president of the Rivers Bridge Monumental and Memorial Association.

quickly restored order and dignity to the commemorations, but the services changed nevertheless as people who remembered the war grew old and died. Fewer Confederate veterans appeared every year at the memorials, and those who did were viewed with awe as living relics of a bygone era. The featured speakers repeated themes heard at earlier ceremonies, such as the valor of the common soldier and the devotion of the southern woman, but more often they focused on current political issues and events. Some of the state's most prominent politicians, including several sitting governors, spoke at Rivers Bridge and thus guaranteed large audiences.

Meanwhile, the Memorial Association worked



*Dr. Leighton Arthur Hartzog of Olar, South Carolina, served forty-five years as president of the Memorial Association.*

to protect the physical traces of the battle of Rivers Bridge. In 1939 the Association acquired the battle site with its well-preserved Confederate earthworks from John D. Jenny, who as a boy had witnessed the fight from a tree. The battlefield opened to the public two years later as John D. Jenny Park. And in 1945 the Memorial Association donated the battlefield, the gravesite, and the land in between to the South Carolina State Forestry Commission to establish the first historic park in the state park system and the only one to commemorate the Confederacy.

During the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Rivers Bridge became the site of one final battle, a verbal engagement fought against the Civil Rights movement. Memorial day speakers attacked efforts to end segregation in the South, and they drew upon the imagery of the Civil War and the Lost Cause for reinforcement. Northerners who supported integration were compared to the abolitionists who had advocated an end to slavery, and old foes such as William Tecumseh Sherman were subjected to renewed scorn.

The spectacle of a large reenactment of the battle brought over 5,000 spectators to Rivers Bridge in 1965, but attendance at the annual



*Still standing proud in 1911, these Confederate veterans were photographed at the laying of the cornerstone for Bamberg County's Confederate monument. As their ranks dwindled, the aging soldiers were viewed with increasing reverence at the memorial services.*



The original memorial shed stood next to the grave marker at Rivers Bridge until it was replaced with a modern, smaller-scale shed.

memorial services steadily dwindled. In 1970 the park superintendent sadly mused that the tradition might soon come to an end.

But the tradition did not end. The Rivers Bridge Memorial Association still exists, and every spring association members and others interested in preserving the region's heritage meet to pay tribute to the Confederacy with a time-honored program. Prayer, music and speeches are followed by the decoration of the simple mass grave and the fellowship that accompanies friendly conversation and good food. An orator at an early commemoration, speaking in the flowery fashion of an earlier time, predicted that the soldiers buried at Rivers Bridge would be remembered in the future:

*"And those who sleep in yonder graves will never be forgotten; for when all of us here assembled shall have passed away; when those sturdy oaks shall have decayed and fallen; when yonder marble shaft shall have crumbled into dust, strong youths and fair maidens will come in the spring-time to lay sweet flowers upon the graves of the immortal dead."*



The Confederate breastworks above the Salkehatchie River were given to the Memorial Association in 1939 and became part of John D. Jenny Park in 1941. The donor of the land, John D. Jenny, had watched the battle of Rivers Bridge from a tree when only fifteen years old.



## Featured Speakers at Rivers Bridge Monumental and Memorial Association



*Richard I. Manning was praised as "a representative of the truest type of Southern gentleman" when he spoke at Rivers Bridge in 1913. Manning later served two terms as governor.*



*James F. Byrnes spoke at Rivers Bridge four times -- in 1916, 1948, 1954, and 1959. Byrnes served as governor, congressman, senator, Supreme Court justice, and secretary of state.*



*Dr. H. H. Wyman, shown here in later years with his wife, gave the first memorial address at Rivers Bridge in 1876. His son, Dr. Ben Wyman, delivered the main address seventy-two years later at the 1948 ceremony.*



*George Duncan Bellinger, who later became state attorney general, spoke at the Rivers Bridge memorial service in 1890.*



## Essay on Sources

Though much has been written about Sherman's campaign in the Carolinas, particularly about the burning of Columbia and the battle at Bentonville, few historians have investigated the campaign from Savannah to Columbia. This narrative of the campaign from the Savannah River to the Salkehatchie River and the battle at Rivers Bridge is based primarily on official reports and other communications of Federal and Confederate officers found in The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Volume XLVII (47), Parts I and II. Commonly referred to as the Official Records, or simply the O.R., this 128-volume compilation is the single most important source for researching the military history of the Civil War. It contains officers' after-action reports, correspondence and telegrams, casualty and strength reports, and other valuable documents. For a small-scale action such as Rivers Bridge, these documents are usually the best – and often the only – information available.

Two reference works are useful for capsule histories of the different Union and Confederate regiments which participated at Rivers Bridge: Frederick H. Dyer, A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion (Des Moines, 1908; Reprint Edition, New York, 1960), Volume III, and Joseph H. Crute, Jr., Units of the Confederate States Army (Midlothian, Virginia, 1987).

A brief, but useful, secondary account of Rivers Bridge is in John G. Barrett's excellent Sherman's March Through the Carolinas (Chapel Hill, 1956). Joseph T. Glaathaar, The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns, (New York, 1985) is a valuable social history of Sherman's army in 1865. Leslie Anders' The Eighteenth Missouri (Indianapolis and New York, 1968), is an outstanding modern regimental history. It includes a detailed narrative of the fight from the perspective of one Union regiment.

Several officers' and soldiers' memoirs or reminiscences mention Rivers Bridge in varying degrees of detail. Among the most significant Federal narratives are William T. Sherman, Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman, Second Edition (New York, 1886; Reprint One-Volume Edition, The Library of America Series, New York, 1990); O. O. Howard, Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General United States Army (New York, 1908), and Ephraim A. Wilson, Memoirs of the War, by Captain Ephraim A. Wilson, of Co. "G," 10th Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry (Cleveland, 1893). Other useful works include Rich-

ard B. Harwell and Philip N. Racine, editors, The Fiery Trail: A Union Officer's Account of Sherman's Last Campaigns (Knoxville, 1986); Charles H. Smith, The History of Fuller's Ohio Brigade 1861-1865. Its Great March ... (Cleveland, 1909); William W. Belknap, History of the Fifteenth Regiment, Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry, from October, 1861, to August 1865... (Keokuk, Iowa, 1887), and Wilfred W. Black, editor, "Marching Through South Carolina: Another Letter of Lieutenant George M. Wise," Ohio Historical Quarterly, 66:2 (April 1957).

Confederate sources other than those in the Official Records are much more scarce than Federal sources. The best participant's account is a series of newspaper articles by Benjamin S. Williams, "Confederate Soldier's Memoirs," "A Confederate Soldier's Memoirs," and "Revives Recollection of Our Own Great War," in the Charleston News, February 22, 1914, March 8, 1914, and January 10, 1915, respectively, and "Mr. Williams Writes of Rivers' Bridge," The State (Columbia), reprinted in the Bamberg Herald (Bamberg, South Carolina), April 25, 1929. Extremely brief mentions of the maneuvers and actions along the Salkehatchie River are C. S. Powell, "Additional Sketch, Tenth Battalion" (Second Battalion Heavy Artillery), in Walter Clark, editor, Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-1865. Written by Members of the Respective Commands (Goldsboro, 1901); and William Andrew Fletcher, Rebel Private Front and Rear (Beaumont, Texas, 1908; Second Edition, Austin, 1954). Short newspaper articles in the Charleston Courier and Charleston Mercury for February 6, 1865, are also of some interest.

Contemporary newspapers provide the bulk of information on the Memorial Association and its annual commemorations. Files of the Bamberg Herald, the Barnwell People, and the Charleston News and Courier were useful in tracing the Association's memorials. Two secondary works help place the memorials in broader context. Gaines M. Foster's Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913 (New York, 1987) is an excellent interpretation of the developing traditions of the Lost Cause and their uses in the half-century following the war. Walter Edgar discusses the preservation of southern battle sites, using Rivers Bridge as an example, in a brief but perceptive essay entitled "Battlefields" in the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, edited by Charles Regan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill, 1987).

## Illustration Credits

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Page 8: Colonel Wager Swayne. Library of Congress Photograph Collection.

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Page 9: Captain Ephraim A. Wilson. From

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Pages 10, 11: Richard Crowe and Alfred Fessenden. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

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Page 16: James F. Byrnes. South Caroliniana Library Photograph Collection. Photograph by Charles Gay.

Page 16: Dr. and Mrs. H.H. Wyman. Photograph provided by Mr. and Mrs. E.M. Seabrook.

Page 16: George Duncan Bellinger. South Caroliniana Library Photograph Collection. Photograph by Charles Gay.



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